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UNCLAS COLOMBO 000508

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR INR/R/MR, I/RW, I/REC; PA  
SA/INS (FOR JWALLER); SA/PD (LJIRWIN, LSCENSNY,  
WREINCKENS); SSA/PAB

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [KPAO](#) [OPRC](#) [KMDR](#) [OIIP](#) [CE](#)

SUBJECT: MEDIA PLAY: IRAQ

REF: (a) COLOMBO 502, (B) COLOMBO 480

1. As reported in reftel (b), Colombo's weekenders (3/22-23) widely criticized what is usually described as an "American war" in Iraq. At mid-week, however, interest is subdued.

2. True, the war dominates Wednesday's (3/26) front-page, above the fold headlines. "Six Iraqi war tanks destroyed" says a Sinhala daily; two English headlines read "Baghdad battle looms" and "Coalition forces close in on Baghdad." The vernacular newspapers stress the danger of chemical weapons: "Coalition forces near Baghdad ... ready for a chemical war" says a Sinhala daily; "Saddam warns that chemical weapons will be used" and "Warning of chemical weapons if coalition forces reach Baghdad" appear in the Tamil dailies.

3. Front-page headlines notwithstanding, however, on 3/26 only one of Sri Lanka's dozen dailies published an editorial regarding the war in Iraq. For excerpts, see para. 5 below.

4. Comment. As alluded to in reftel (A), in recent conversation with our PAO, the editor of a major English daily said that, in Sri Lanka, editorial and op-ed treatment of the war is little more than chattering classes talking to each other. Ordinary Sri Lankans are focused on peace at home, not war in Iraq. The Sinhalese majority, he said, are more leery of the Tamil minority than of Saddam. ... or Bush. And the Tamil minority's apprehensions, in turn, are focused more on the Sinhalese majority and the Island's Muslim sub-minority than on events beyond these shores. Pocketbook issues may arouse Sri Lankan interest in the war, however. As we have reported on other occasions, Sri Lankans -- and not just the chattering classes -- wonder openly if the war will threaten remittances from Sri Lankan workers or increase the price of oil or depress the market for Sri Lankan tea. As/when the war begins to "pinch the Sri Lankan purse," the editor said, Sri Lankan opinion may grow ugly. End comment.

5. Excerpts from an editorial, "Save the civilians," which appeared in the ISLAND (opposition English daily, islandwide circulation) on 3/26:

"... despite the atrocities committed by President Saddam Hussein on his people, Arab nationalism and the bonds of the Islamic brotherhood are keeping not only the Iraqis together but have resulted in emphatic expressions of solidarity in other Islamic countries as well.

"People ... don't like armies of occupation. If it comes to a choice between their own tyrant and a foreign army, they would prefer their own abomination. A long time military occupation of Iraq is bound to create severe problems for the Americans and the British.

"The Iraqis, however, will suffer most. The many horrors of war have already visited the areas of occupation. There are ringing calls made around the world for provision of assistance to the Iraqi civilians and UN Secretary General Koffi Annan yesterday reminded the that the 'belligerents' are obliged to provide relief measures under international law.

"The people of Iraq have suffered much under their own dictator and they should not be made to undergo further agony and torture in war."

Wills